

US Ambassador praises continued strength of bilateral relationship

‘The region’s future depends on economic and political liberalisation’

By Habib Toumi

THE fact that His Majesty the King, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, was the second leader to call on President George Bush at the White House after his re-election is a good indication of how strong the Bahrain-US relations are," the US Ambassador to Bahrain, William Monroe, has said.

"There were many leaders waiting to visit Washington, and we are pleased that HM the King and President Bush met so soon after the elections. The visit was very important for both countries and discussions covered the key issues," Monroe said.

"The two leaders discussed the way forward, the developments in Iraq, the Middle East, Afghanistan and bilateral relations. The FTA was also raised during the talks," the ambassador told *Bahrain Tribune* in his first interview since he took his post in August.

King Hamad made a working visit to the US on November 29 and was welcomed by President George Bush at the White House. The two leaders also met in June at the G8 Summit at Sea Island, Georgia.

The ambassador said that the US held in high esteem Bahrain's reforms. "We have been very positive that HM the King has taken up democratisation and we are very supportive of the process that HM has chosen. On the economic front, Bahrain's moves have also been very positive," he said.

Free Trade Agreement

Monroe expressed confidence that the Bahrain-US Free Trade Agreement (FTA) would be taken up by the US Congress in an early session. "There are no sensitive issues such as labour or environmental concerns that would create opposition and we hope it will be ratified soon," Monroe said.

Bahrain and the US signed the trade deal on September 14 in Washington after a few months of negotiations. The deal will eliminate tariffs on all consumer and industrial products and on 81 per cent of US agricultural exports to Bahrain. The FTA will also streamline digital trade, protect intellectual property, facilitate government procurement, and provide for effective enforcement of environmental and labour laws.

The agreement has been recently criticised by Saudi Arabia as a violation of the GCC accords, saying that agreements should be negotiated collectively. Bahrain has defended its position, arguing that the pact was negotiated in coordination with the economic cooperation committee of the GCC.

Other GCC members sided with Bahrain, and the UAE and Oman are set to start negotiations next year with the US for a trade deal. Saudi Arabia, the only GCC country that is not a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), has not publicly commented on the decision by the UAE and Oman to start negotiations.

Monroe said that the public row did not affect the US position, stressing that there were no concerns that Bahrain would change its stance and adding that all the statements made by Bahraini officials were in support of the trade deal, the first with a Gulf country. "We are happy and at the same time not surprised that Bahrain is proceeding with the agreement which was negotiated openly," he said.

"The FTA is a positive move towards the region. We have a greater vision for the region, and we started with the countries that were ready and welcomed the initiative," he said.

The US, which also signed FTAs with Morocco and Jordan in the Arab world, looks forward to agreements with other countries. "However, we cannot wait for the whole world to be perfect before entering trade agreements," he said.

Monroe refused to comment

on whether the pressure on Bahrain after signing the agreement was fair, and argued that it was an internal GCC matter. "I would like however to emphasise that the US believes strongly that FTAs with individual countries would not only benefit those countries, but also the whole region," he said.

Bahrain's advantages

Monroe said that the policy of the US in trade negotiations was to look at where the opportunities were. "Some countries are

has ample opportunities," he said.

The forum brought together the ministers of foreign affairs and the ministers of economy and finance of the countries of the Broader Middle East and North Africa, their G8 counterparts and their partners. Organisers of the 30-nation gathering, attended by outgoing US Secretary of State Colin Powell, said that the forum hoped to provide "a setting for an informal, flexible, open and inclusive dialogue, devoted to strengthening democracy and the participation of civil society, to developing

not forcing timetables and schedules on a country "to get certain things done", but added that the US "encouraged" countries to take up offers of programmes and assistance.

"There is for instance the National Democratic Institute which assists with ideas on how committees are set up, how bills are passed in the legislatures, how elections are run. We are offering a menu in a way."

Although liberalisation is not easy, he said, there was "a certain receptivity to the offers".

"The important thing is that at the end of the day, you are mov-

ing in a positive direction. Countries move at different speeds, and we cannot impose on them how fast they should move," he said.

troops for the elections. We want to make sure that Iraq is as secure as possible for the elections," he said. "The violence, whether against Iraqis or Americans, is tragic. We are all saddened by it."

He stressed that despite the bleak picture, there was hope. "People should be aware that lost in all the violence, is interesting, positive news. More than 7,000 people have registered as candidates for the national elections and another 9,000 have registered for the provincial elections."

He said that such high figures belied claims that Iraqis were intimidated into boycotting the polls. "People are confident enough to want to participate in the elections," he said. "It is not just Shias or Kurds, but also Sunnis. In fact, there are 27 different blocs willing to participate in the polls. We estimated that 14 out of 18 provinces could participate in the elections without problems and we are working on the remaining four provinces."

Monroe rejected claims that the US would use the elections to gain legitimacy for its presence in Iraq. "I think that people have huge misunderstandings about what the US wants in Iraq and in the region in general. We were in Kuwait back in 1991, and people said that the Americans would not leave because they wanted the oil. We liberated Kuwait and we left. The oil is today in the hands of Kuwait and their parliament is very suspicious of any oil deal with the US. We did not impose ourselves after the liberation of Kuwait," he said.

"What we want in Iraq is to have a modern, independent and democratic country," he said.

The ambassador said that the US administration did not wish to see an Iranian model of rule in Iraq. "There are two things worth noting here: A successful Iraq will have to take into account Sunnis and Kurds because the country is too diverse to be dominated by one group. Second, people thought about the possibility that Iran would dominate Iraq. We have expressed concern about foreign interference in Iraq."

"However, let us give the Iraqi Shias credit. They do not have a history of looking positively on a domination by Shias from another country. There is a long history of not being dominated by other countries," he said. He also ruled out any kind of a super-power union between Iraq and Iran. "Iraq would have serious domestic problems."

Monroe appreciated that some governments in the region have expressed concern that Iraq was becoming a training ground for potential terrorists, but said that the ground in the region was less fertile for terrorists because governments are now committed to combat terrorism. International information-sharing and closer cooperation would help tackle the situation.

"One difference between what happened in Afghanistan and what is happening in Iraq is the greater awareness of exchanging information and working together," he said. Public reaction is also another difference, he said. "In Afghanistan, people who were involved in the struggle were seen as heroes. The violence was not directed against Muslims."

"In Iraq, they are not heroes. Much of the violence is against fellow Muslims. People understand that what they are doing in Iraq does not represent Islam. There was not a lot of cheering in Jeddah when our Consulate there was attacked. In fact, the attack killed innocent Muslims. That kind of activity does not win much support," he said.

Palestinian state

Monroe said that the US Administration was serious about a Palestinian state. "President Bush has made it quite clear. There are three interesting things that offer hope: President Bush, a man of his word, was re-elected and is com-

No clash with Nato

The diplomat added that the broader Middle East initiative did not clash with the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, launched in June by NATO to foster closer ties and cooperation with the six states of the Gulf on a country basis. "Different initiatives can help. It cannot be that if you follow this programme, then nothing else works."

Monroe attributed the greater interest by the West in the Middle East to the region's need to benefit from the globalisation factor and to open up. "The US had always been interested in the Middle East. However, we realise that in light of globalisation, the region is falling behind many other regions in the world. East Asia has been advancing steadily. Latin America has for the last 20-30 years made huge strides. Even in Africa, and in the midst of the sad stories, there are

"There is a momentum that is created when countries launch reforms in any area and it helps foster reforms on a wider scale."

ready, and you do not then wait for other countries to be as ready. A good example is Singapore which is an advanced and very open country. We did not want to wait for all of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) states to have the FTA. It would have taken 20 years or more. Singapore, like Bahrain, was ready. It too had a trade-friendly regime and high standards. We judged that it made sense to bring benefits to Singapore and the Asean countries," he said. Singapore and the US signed their FTA in 2003.

He said that Bahrain had two advantages over the rest of the Gulf states. "First, it had a good trade framework, the ability to make it aligned with what we think are requirements to sign a free trade agreement. Second, it had a government that was ready to proceed with the FTA," he said.

Reforms

Monroe said that the Broader Middle East and North Africa initiative offered opportunities to accelerate political and econom-

ic reforms. "There is a series of different programmes that countries can choose from," he said, rejecting claims that the US was imposing its own version of reforms. "We recognise that it was never our intention to impose anything. Countries have to want the reforms," he said.

He described the Forum for the Future which was held on December 11 in Rabat and which addressed potential reforms in the region as "successful".

"I think we had a good meeting in Morocco. Of course, there were different views, but it was successful," Monroe said that the initiative offered a framework for advantages.

"A country that wants entrepreneurship, or education training or development programmes

skills training, and to encouraging the growth of modern economies that generate wealth and that are well integrated into the global economy."

However, Arab and Islamic states stressed that the Arab-Israeli conflict was the leading obstacle to reform and democracy in the Middle East, dismissing a US appeal that reform begin without any connection to political disputes in the region.

The states "reaffirmed that their support for reform in the region will go hand-in-hand with their support for a just, comprehensive and lasting settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict," the communiqué at the end of the forum said.

The second meeting will be held in November 2005 in Bahrain "to assess the progress achieved and to continue sharing their ideas as they advance together towards a future of peace and prosperity."

According to the US diplomat, the US initiative sought to engage the private sector in addition to governments because the private sector could help economic reforms. "In the Association of South East Asian

Nations (Asean) model, economic reforms led to political and social reforms," he said; he insisted though that every country was different. "There is a momentum that is created when countries launch reforms in any area and it helps foster reforms on a wider scale. FTA does not bring automatic benefits, but it does offer the framework."

In comments about whether the US exercised pressure to make countries in the Gulf embrace reforms, Monroe said that "we make it very clear that we believe that the future of this region will depend on opening up and on economic and political liberalisation. We make our stance clear in public statements and private discussions."

He stressed that the US was

countries where democracy has begun to take roots," he said.

Monroe put the blame on the economic status of the region. "The Middle East may be partially a victim of its oil wealth, with the states not thinking far ahead. Bahrain has recognised early on that the wealth from the oil would not last, and started looking at the future through economic and political liberalisation," he said.

Situation in Iraq

The US diplomat said that the Bush administration was not surprised by the increase in the violence in Iraq as the January 30 elections draw nearer. "That is why we are bringing in more



Ambassador William Monroe

WILLIAM T. Monroe was confirmed by the US Senate on June 25, 2004 as the Ambassador of the United States to the Kingdom of Bahrain. He assumed his responsibilities in Manama on August 24, 2004.

Monroe served as Deputy Chief of Mission at the US embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, from April 2002 to June 2004. Prior to that he was Deputy Chief of Mission at the US embassy in Kuwait.

Monroe joined the US Foreign Service in 1978 and has served in a variety of positions at US embassies in the Middle East and Asia, including Egypt, Iraq, Burma, Oman, China, Singapore, Kuwait and Pakistan.

In the Department of State, he has worked in the Bureau of Political Military Affairs and the Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs.

An economic officer, Monroe worked for three years as an international trade specialist at the Department of Commerce before joining the Department of State. He undertook long-term Arabic language training in Tunis and Chinese in Taipei.

Monroe received his B.A. in history from Stanford University and his M.A. in international relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

Monroe is married to Benedicte du Cheyron d'Abzac and has three children: Adrian (18), Stephen (16), and Tiphaine (12).

mitted to working towards a two-state solution; the Palestinian authority has a new leadership; and Israel is about to withdraw from Gaza strip. There is an opportunity, and we are all working on it. There will be attempts to sabotage it, but we will work," he said. "President Bush will be working with both sides."

The White House said on December 8 that the Bush administration would provide \$20 million in direct budgetary support to the Palestinian Authority to help the Palestinian leadership address some of its financial issues as it seeks to hold presidential elections on January 9, 2005, and put institutions in place.

"We want to do everything we can to help the Palestinian people as they move forward on the holding elections, and this contribution of financial assistance hopefully will send a signal to other nations as well that they should help the Palestinian people," the White House said.

Guantanamo Bay

Monroe said that although there was nothing new on the case of the six Bahrainis detained at Guantanamo Bay, the Bahraini government has been "actively working with us, letting us know that they are trying to find a solution." The diplomat said that he did not know what was going to happen. "There is a process, part of it is legal. Unfortunately, right now, I have no specific information about the six Bahrainis."

Exciting times in Bahrain

Monroe said that he has been "overwhelmed by the hospitality of the people. It is a wonderful experience. I am glad that

Bahrain's reputation as warm and hospitable is proving true," he said.

The diplomat added that he was excited to be in Bahrain because he had an economic background.

"These are exciting times to be in Bahrain as we are working on broadening and bolstering commercial and trade cooperation. I am working on encouraging US companies to look at the Bahraini market and encouraging Bahraini companies about the opportunities they have in the US market," he said. "We have strong relations and good commercial ties. The FTA offers new opportunities for Bahraini and American companies as partners."

The ambassador said that his family also loved Bahrain. "My wife is here and two of my three children go to Bahrain School. They are happy here."

Bahrain School

Monroe expressed confidence about the future of Bahrain School, saying that there would be a Bahrain School for many years.

"We will maintain the Bahrain School as the strong and excellent school that it has always been for Americans and others. I am aware that there were concerns about the future of the school. I am working personally, both as a father and as an ambassador, to make sure that Bahrain School continues to offer its first-class US education to the American and non-American communities," he said. "I am working with my government, with the Bahrain government and the Bahrain International School Association (BISA) on the future of the school to ensure that the communities have their excellent school."



Ambassador Monroe giving his first interview in Bahrain to *Bahrain Tribune*.

Pictures - Aqeel Abdulrahman